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ABSTRACT

Twelve graduate students from a variety of fields who were enrolled in a qualitative research class met in an informal setting that facilitated a collaborative learning mode--defined in this presentation as a method of group interaction whereby all members learn from each other's experiences, scholarship, and skills. The first of the six papers making up this document gives a general introduction to the project. As individuals and as a group, members work on a tangible end product such as a book or a series of articles. The process, however, is perhaps more important than the product. The students chose seven focal topics to guide their meetings: (1) interviewing, (2) writing, (3) politics, (4) ethics, (5) gaining access, (6) participant observation, and (7) data analysis. All but the first two are discussed by the students. Their thoughts on how the collaborative learning process helped them work through these topics and related them to their own qualitative research are insightful and could be of use to a novice qualitative researcher. Five themes became apparent to the students: (1) learning collaboratively develops camaraderie; (2) learning collaboratively does not eliminate the anxiety associated with doing qualitative research, but it does moderate, redirect, and make use of that anxiety; (3) humor plays a vital role in the collaborative process; (4) the process is evolutionary in nature and takes time; and (5) diversity contributes positvely to collaboration. The five remaining papers were contributed by members of the group and provide varying personal perspectives on the experience. (JB)

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AERA presentation script

Collaborative Learning:

Experiences of a Qualitative Research Class

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Collaborative Learning:

Experiences of a Qualitative Research Class

The Beginning.

It began, or rather was settled, with a fortune cookie. On a cold Vermont evening just before Christmas a year ago, my qualitative research class met for an end of semester gathering and feast. With Szechuan dishes consumed, Linda broke open the first fortune cookie. "Quantity is the enemy of quality," she read.

Although none of us endorse a qualitative quantitative split, we took this fortune as an omen to continue meeting another semester as an advanced qualitative seminar. The students wished to develop further their understanding of qualitative methods and to continue having a structure for persevering with their own qualitative research projects. I wanted to experiment with a more collaborative mode of learning, and I was hopeful that the semester's work would result in a useful product.

At the conclusion of this panel presentation, I will focus on themes of collaboration drawn from our experience. Right now, however, I will set the scene with a description of the process we used and of the people who participated. Then each of the other panel participants will discuss a substantive topic such as "gaining access" or "the politics of doing qualitative research as a graduate student" with an emphasis upon learning collaboratively.

"Collaborative learning" may be one of those concepts like

"reflective teaching" that sound good, but on closer analysis seem vague and amorphous. What you've got when you are learning collaboratively, cooperatively, or through coresponsible inquiry is subject to a variety of interpretations. In our definition as used in this presentation, all members of a group interact with each other whereby they learn from each other's experiences, scholarship, and skills. As individuals and as a group, members work on a tangible end product such as a book or a series of articles. The process, however, is as important or more important than the product.

The Process.

Twelve of us met for three hours every Tuesday night in my living room. At the beginning of the semester, the students chose seven focal topics to guide our gatherings. You will hear on five of these topics today: politics, ethics, gaining access, participant observation, and data analysis. "Interviewing" and "writing" are omitted. In general, two students took responsibility for one of the seven topics. As a team, each pair was to facilitate a class discussion on its topic and to write a "chapter" for a group manuscript on "Thoughts and Advice for Novice Qualitative Researchers." Each week all students wrote short reflection papers on the focal theme, drawing examples from their own fieldwork. The teams collected "chapter" data from weekly discussions which were taped, from the reflection papers, and from assigned and unassigned readings.

Towards the end of the semester, we held an overnight writing retreat in a large home that belonged to one of the students. Our computers betrayed that our sleeping bags and

sacks of groceries did not signify a fifth-grade slumber party. Students brought copies of their chapter drafts which we worked on as a group and individually for a day and a half addressing matters of style, voice, tone, and content.

The People

Members of the group come from several different disciplines: education, nursing, physical therapy, and psychology. Most are simultaneously professionals and part-time students. All had begun qualitative research projects, but the research activities reflected the diversity of the group. They ranged from interest in the multiple roles of school principals to women's friendships to the tool-shaping behavior of a gorilla. I think it some measure of the collaborative spirit that developed that now, a year later, half of the group has continued to meet to prepare this presentation on "Becoming Qualitative Researchers through Collaboration and Mutual Support." Each member will be introduced by the preceding speaker through reading portions of the portraitures that the larger group developed when preparing an introduction to our manuscript. As you will see, they are somewhat personal in nature. (Lorri)

Collaborative Learning.

In reflecting upon our collaborative learning of qualitative research methods, I've noted a number of themes, many of which have been mentioned in the preceding presentations. Five seem most important to me: (1) learning collaboratively develops comraderie, (2) learning collaboratively does not eliminate the anxiety associated with doing qualitative research, but it does moderate, redirect, and help make use of that anxiety, (3) humor

plays a vital role in the collaborative process, (4) the process is evolutionary in nature and takes time, and (5) diversity contributes positively to collaboration.

Comraderie. Heldke (1988), in her work on coresponsible inquiry, states that participants must be responsive to and respective of all members in the inquiry community. The members of our group provided each other with mutual support that involved careful listening and respectful questioning. We saw each other as active, compassionate knowers and grew to trust each other with our insecurities. Through this, a sense of comraderie developed. We became a community of researchers. Because we got along as a group, does not mean that we always agreed. We found ourselves arguing, in particular, over ethical delimmas and political problems. Such "points of dissonance" (Miller, 1988), raised not only new questions, but also awareness levels. Members achieved new perspectives, but not necessarily the same perspectives. Group members learned well that qualitative research is an interpretive process and that interpretation is negotiable.

Anxiety. Insecurity over all stages of the research process was common across participants, although more pronounced for some than for others. Each new step seemed ambiguous without clear rules or directions. In addition, many of the group members were administrators or teachers, used to being in charge, and quite confident of themselves in their professional roles. That they did not feel this way in their research role also contributed to anxiety. The collaborative environment allowed us to view our anxieties as a natural part of the process, not as individual

"problems." And as we listened to each other's worries, offering either reassurances or suggestions for confronting anxiety-producing situations, we became more willing to expose and tackle our own insecurities.

Humor. Humor was an essential, something that evolved through the first semester together, but reached new heights in our Tuesday night sessions. Humor facilitated our learning, helped us to combat anxiety and allowed us to be honest and critical of one another. Through laughter, we lowered our defenses and examined what we might have otherwise ignored. Each group member teased and was teased. Banter became an expected part of communication. We listened and spoke seriously, but, as a group, we also had fun.

Diversity. The diversity represented by group members in their professional disciplines, research interests, and stages in the educational process seemed to contribute to the collaborative process. Not being familiar with the practice of physical therapy, we all asked Ernie questions that other physical therapists might not have. He, in turn, had to explain himself fully. The diversity contributed to the emergence of new perspectives. In addition, no one in the group felt as though he or she were competing with another which may have happened had everyone been in, for example, special education. Each was accepted as an "expert" in a discipline, but as a novice in qualitative research.

Evolving Nature and Time. Qualitative research is evolutionary in nature and takes time. Collaborative learning is similarly evolutionary and demanding of time. It takes time to

process individual learnings through discussion, arriving, thereby, at general learnings. A lecture is more time-efficient, but, I think, less effective. It takes time to coordinate outside meetings to work on collaborative writing. Yet, something about qualitative research and the collaborative process motivates one to find the time and to work and rework papers and continue to meet even when the semester is long over. And as we meet, we continue to make discoveries about ourselves, our work, and our collaborative process.

A friend was visiting during one of our presentation preparation sessions. After everyone had left, she commented on how she was struck by the lack of defensiveness in the group. She stated, "People truely LISTENED to each other, without feeling the need to explain or defend or attack in return." Her observation brought home to me the power of the outsider's perspective. Our interaction style was something I no longer saw because it was simply how we interact. I thought back to the first semester class and a session with one person near tears after a group critique of her writing. We have grown considerably since then.

Conclusions

In conclusion, we did produce a text, a handbook of description, thought, and advice to other novice qualitative researchers. That we have not "done" anything with this text other than go on to prepare this presentation is almost beside the point. It was the process of discussing, analyzing, and writing about qualitative research as a group while carrying out individual qualitative research projects that functioned to

create an effective learning environment. From shared individual experiences, the group's understanding of the research process grew. Through the group's assistance and support, individual projects flourished. Through working as a group on the text, members practiced once again their skills in participant observation, interviewing, data analysis, and writing to portray the thoughts of students conducting qualitative research. The 120 pages represent much more than the stated words.

Politics of Qualitative Research

by

Laurie Murray

Politics was a topic which weekly appeared in our conversations. Yet, when asked to submit a written narrative on "politics" over half the group members did not. This may be attributed to other restraints in our busy lives, or it may reflect to some extent our avoidance of the topic. Those who did write all indicated uncomfortableness in writing about politics. Dan's words may best describe the feelings of the group:

> As I reflect in preparation for this short paper, I am struck by the discomfort I feel towards writing about this subject in relation to my research. The discomfort originates in the very real role of political considerations in the process of qualitative research. It is not those political considerations that cause my discomfort, it is the act of writing them down on paper. We all have to find ways to accommodate politics, part of the process is to recognize and deal with them, without making a big deal or raising a high profile that might attract more political attention. Writing about them in a paper feels awkward for that reason, they are real. I discuss them with advisors and colleagues, but I don't like putting them in black and white!

Some of us may have been uneasy writing about politics because

of the very personal implications a discussion would have on our lives. For example, Dick has conducted his field work with all the new principals in the state of Vermont. Discussing any specific political problems which he encountered may have considerable political implications for Dick, especially if he plans on continuing his career in the state of Vermont.

When the group sat down to discuss our uneasiness with politics, we were able to freely discuss the subject, but hesitant to be quoted. Discussing the specific strategies utilized with peers is acceptable, but letting it become public knowledge is not a normal practice. This may be related to the nation that scientific endeavors are "pure" and therefore not touched by politics. Many of us were also worried about making public or political concerns as we are still involved with the subjects, gatekeepers, or the agency. Nancy, for example, is studying a Gorilla in a zoo. There is only one zoo within 250 miles, therefore, it is important for her to not offend zoo officials if she intends to have access to the zoo in the future. My research project involves a dialysis unit in Vermont. There is only one dialysis unit in the state, which is part of the only Medical Center in Vermont, which is affiliated with the University of Vermont, my employer. Specifically, describing any political hoops could adversely affect my job at the University or make it extremely difficult for me to do any further research in that Medical Center.

Before describing the various types of politics involved in qualitative research, we will discuss what some of us believe the

"clearest political arena", the value placed upon quantitative research.

Perhaps politics is the exertion of one's values with power. The "value-free" image of science is a misnomer. The value of scientific knowledge purely for the sake of knowledge is a myth. Science has a set of value assumptions which are present, although not always explicit. Therefore, scientific endeavors (research) are laden with value and filled with political concerns. Politics is and has always been intertwined with research.

Both the motives of scientists who are selecting areas to be investigated and the influences and beliefs of society affect research. To say that science is "value-free" indicates that science does not place importance on any idea, methodology, fact, or design. This is a fallacy:
Scientists are human beings, who have their own inherent individual set of convictions and beliefs which cannot be separated from their self.

During the past century the quantitative design has dominated the "scientific communities." Many scientists view quantitative research as the only worthy form. Clearly one political concern is the monopoly of positivistic research. Jackie suggested that those of us who want to do qualitative research must:

> Go someplace where they historically accept such research; do it on the side; do it in addition to "real" science; and do it 100 times better than anyone else has to do their "real" science projects. If we want to persist in doing qualitative

work that we understand and value quantitative research. Those who do quantitative research do not have to know of the existence of qualitative research. There is a clear double standard here, based on what is considered "good" science. The power struggle between the two paradigms creates a political challenge for qualitative researchers.

No one form of research is "the answer;" we (qualitative researchers) are just trying to paint a picture that puts together things in a framework that makes sense at this moment.

The issue of politics seems to encompass all aspects of the research process from gaining access to deciding what to write about in the final report. The discussion will highlight some of the political dilemmas which have arisen for us while conducting qualitative research. While we all are involved in an unique research project, the political problems which have developed contain similar properties.

Employment Politics

Employment politics sometimes come into play when the researchers pursues an investigation both within and outside of their place of employment. We often found that we were balancing two roles and one subtle slip could easily put one's position or the other in jeopardy.

Using ones employment position to gain access is one common means utilized by the members of our group. Dick used his position as a State Consultant to the Principals to provide him with the names of all the new principals in the entire state. knowing. Dick through his state position allowed the subjects to consider him an "expert" in their field. Being labeled an

expert helped Dick, but sometimes associations with organizations can hinder a researcher.

Sometimes using one's employment could be considered an exertion of political power on the part of the researcher. For example, it might be hard for the new principals to refuse to talk with Dick. After all, Dick may have some indirect influence on their future careers.

Working with a thesis/dissertation committee

For some of us quantitative research was not a feasible option as the knowledge regarding our area of interest may not have been explored. Regardless of the reason for the utilization of qualitative research, it is the researcher's responsibility to "play" the political game to educate, and to convince others of the validity of the qualitative research design. Jackie, researching women's friendships, spent almost her entire proposal hearing convincing others on the merits of qualitative methods.

The need to defend qualitative research becomes apparent when a student researcher begins formulating his dissertation or thesis committee. When utilizing a qualitative design it seems that many of us found it necessary to defend our choice of methodology more than our peers for selecting a quantitative design. Several of us, Jackie in Psychology, Ernie in Education and myself in Nursing found that many "scientists" were unfamiliar with the methods involved with qualitative research. Many times unless a study contains a population of 30 or more individuals, many "scholars" did not truly understand the relevance or possible significance of our findings. Many times

we were caught in the trap of trying to be true to the methodology while attempting to please our committee members without insulting their intelligence. This was not an easy task.

For these reasons it was important for each of us to carefully select individuals with at least some receptivity to qualitative research. Dan pointed out that "some of of the university's restrictions on the composition of doctoral committees and the limited number of faculty with a background in qualitative research make it difficult to put together the perfect committee." Typically, as student researchers, we found ourselves spending a considerable amount of time educating members of the committee on the design, methodology approaches and providing an in-depth rationale for the selection of qualitative research. We all learned that this process of education needed to begin with the initial proposal and it was necessary to continue throughout the dissertation process.

Our Political Motives

Even though most of us would not admit it openly, we each have motives for our choice of any particular research topic. Dick believes that others need to see that new principals need more help in adjusting to their new roles. Laurie chose a topic that has only begun to be investigated. In this choice she would like to become the expert on "empowerment" which could reap both financial and professional reward.

While none of us may have chosen our specific area to research for purely political reasons surely there is a political aim in our choice of a topic. To say that there were not motives would in fact be a fallacy. Let's face the

facts, political considerations are a normal part of many of our daily decisions. Why would one devote so much labor in a particular area if he did not see some gains for his efforts? Although the political gains of our research may be secondary to our guest for more knowledge, for some political (and financial) gains may be the primary impetus for a research endeavor.

Summary

A definition of politics may be the point at which to end this chapter. Politics is defined and shaped as it is experienced. Politics is pervasive, pragmatic, negotiable, and self-protective. When we first started our research, we believed it to be "pure"; the need to be cunning was not as apparent. We tended to negate politics to spheres other than our graduate studies. This is naive. It is prudent to start out knowing there will be areas and times that ask for caution, analysis, and discernment. We found it important to stop and take a "look-before-you-choose" attitude.

Getting Started

Daniel N. Kucij

University of Vermont

In C. Glesne (Chair) Becoming Qualitative Researchers Through Collaborative Processes. Symposium conducted at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA. March, 1989

We had all heard the cautions about carrying out a qualitative research project. It takes time. it can be long and drawn out. Yet we were all committed to trying a qualitative approach. We discussed the ways we found to make it easier to undertake qualitative research and ways around some of the problems we encountered. It began by discussing the selection of problems to study and the location of potential sites.

As Carolyn shared, " I have been involved in Special Education in one way or another for the past 10 years, as a teacher, parent, and student. so I felt it would be easy for me to gain entry and set up my interviews (with special education administrators). I chose five in my county because it was close to my home and school. I also knew four of the administrators personally and felt this would be in my favor."

As part-time graduate students, fully employed and well into our careers many members of our group successfully turned to the familiar, to known environments, to current professions or even to our current place of employment as a source for

the research problem and in some instances as the site to carry-out the research.

However, our class discussion and written papers sometimes revealed that doing qualitative research with participants with friends or acquaintances can present some new problems, such as Carolyn found when interviewing one of the administrators she knew, who also happened to be a former teacher of hers.

Carolyn said, "he never forgot he had been my teacher and that is how he acted. He was really lecturing me about his program rather than relaxing and giving me more in depth answers."

Yet, there were ways our professional life was an asset to our beginning research. Several of us found the process of getting started made easier by select a problem that was comfortable and interesting due to our previous experience and/or training, but not necessarily one we were directly involved in at the present.

Another possibility that came out of our group discussion was collaboration with or cooperation from other researchers. However, just as undertaking research in your current place of

employment may affect your relationships in the field, so can piggy-backing on the work of others. We found that people at the site may associate us with the previous researchers in variety of ways, some helpful and some not.

As we shared our experiences with the beginning phase of our projects it seemed there were certain concerns that could be anticipated. One common concern centered around the potential for disruption to the setting that the research represents.

As Ernie shared, "Gaining access to the hospital seemed directly related to whether or not my work would impact the institution. I think the institution allowed me access because I was able to convince them that my work would do no harm." In Ernie's case, these concerns centered around confidentiality. We found promising and maintaining confidentiality to be of utmost importance.

As we discussed our experiences, the sense emerged that gaining access was a process of negotiation. What do you promise for what you get? Part of it entailed providing information

and answering questions from potential participants.

For example, one science teacher delayed participation in Linda's study until they had extensively discussed the distinctions between quantitative and qualitative research. Many potential participants wanted to know more about the process of the research and some were very curious about the results.

Several of us found it was helpful to have developed a description of the project, like an introduction, and to be able to share our motives for both the project and this style of research.

When it comes to preliminary sharing of data, some of us became overburdened with promises of feedback we had made to others, and realized the need to think in advance of limits we could live with. At what point in the study would it be comfortable? How much and in what form? How often and to what audience?

As Ernie reported, "Over the early weeks of the study his (Department Manager) constant questioning was extending the amount of time I was going to need to complete my study. We then

agreed to have a meeting upon my arrival each Monday morning. This seemed to eliminate the need to answer questions in an unplanned fashion and made me more efficient."

We found setting up some kind of feedback system mutually agreeable with those who are interested can efficiently satisfy their need for information and help them be comfortable at this stage as well as maintain rapport in an on-going fashion.

We concluded it was possible to mutually agree on how to handle certain types of problems if they come up. One way to anticipate or to resolve hidden concerns is to directly ask participants about them ahead of time. Not only did this help avoid pitfalls, but it also assisted the building a confident, trusting relationship.

Most of us tended to focus or emphasize our roles as student-learners. Someone who is there to learn from the site, not to impose advice or pass judgment on others. By stressing the emergent quality of our research and ourselves as researchers, participants seemed to feel more comfortable, we felt less pressured to be experts and getting started was facilitated.

DATA COLLECTION: LOOKING AT OURSELVES

Linda M. Ayer

University of Vermont

In C. Clesne (Chair) Becoming Qualitative Researchers Through Collaborative Processes. Symposium conducted at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA. March, 1989

Twelve of us graduate students committed to met each Tuesday of the spring semester. The sub-zero January temperatures did not deter us from discussions when often lasted more than three hours. And when we left, the skies were either cloudy or bright with stars; sometimes offering a metaphor for what we had experienced.

We asked difficult questions which ended up in ethical or political arguments. Some of us chose to simply listen, watch, think or write while munching on veggies and popcorn. Confusion reared its ugly head, "ah-ha" connections were made, we studied ourselves in the process of developing an understanding of what was involved in qualitative research.

We are here to demonstrate the dynamic of our support group sessions. Three issues emerged around our role as researchers. The first was how we adapted to our role as participant observers and were able to blend into the setting. The second was the way in which others dealt with us in our researcher roles and the fine line we walked between observation and participation. Third, we developed an awareness of the subjectivity we brought to the role and our ethical responsibility to protect the rights of the individuals we were studying.

Because we are in the helping professions, we have in our repertoire skills which can be adapted to our chosen research sites. Each of us has had practice interviewing, and listening; these are human relationship skills important in establishing rapport with people. But being participant observers requires that we change our role from professional to researcher, a difficult accomplishment because as novice researchers we have greater competence in our discipline than in our researcher role.

Through our group discussions we found that in participant observation it was necessary to suspend ourselves and enter our researcher selves.

Dan explains his process: "Participant observation is not my dominant method. My primary method is interview. One issue I've had to deal with is distinguishing when I'm in my interviewer kind of mode as opposed to when I'm just along with them on a trip and I want to have a chance to observe what they do. When I go along with somebody else, I am like a third wheel and I have to walk a tight rope between sometimes being content to be quiet and being comfortable with silence."

There have been times when that's been a problem as Dan is a person who enjoys conversation and sometimes finds it is hard to restrain from getting involved in the conversation he is documenting.

Some of us described our roles as being "outsider/insiders" or that of "outsider looking in."

Ernie describes a common feeling we held as we took on a participant observation role. "My interest in the profesionalization of physical therapists lead to my exploration of the process by which this was achieved. Because the setting is familiar to me, I can hear quicker, I gather information more efficiently, and I am open to seeing more. I get to see what I already know, more quickly getting to what I don't know. I worry about missing things but after I check observations in another setting, I am able to validate that I am seeing the same patterns. Being close to the setting doesn't necessarily cloud my perspective."

One thing we realized was that knowing about participant/observation and doing participant/observation are different and this presented some interesting dilemmas for us in how we perceived our role and how others perceive our role in the setting. Corrine recalls a situation that Sue encountered. "Sue's expertise in ethics surpassed that of a teaching colleague she was observing who was teaching an ethics class. The teacher asked her a question and Sueanswered it.

She knew she'd been drawn in as a teacher and she lost her observer role. She wanted to revert back to her researcher role, but because she had "participated" she had altered the natural setting. It would have been better to just shrug when the question was directed at her."

During our weekly sessions we pondered other questions: What prompts one to abandon their researcher role? What is the purpose of the observations? What options are available to the investigator to avoid participation when invited to abandon the "researcher self"?

There is ambivalance around which role to assume as a researcher in a familiar setting. When we see our roles as mentor, counselor, and former principal, nurse, teacher, physical therapist, manager, etc., we struggle with how much probing to do because specific questions have triggered unanticipated emotions in subjects. Also observations of interactions were highlighted because of experiences in a variety of roles that are sometimes facilitated within the setting by gatekeepers.

For instance, my participant observer's role was facilitated by the principal of the school who had requested that all faculty do peer observations within a six week period in order to familiarize themselves with others classroom settings and instructional methods. Because every teacher in the school was assuming an observer's role, my observation became an accepted behavior at the school.

In Nancy's studies of a silver back gorilla, there were other considerations. Blending into the zoo setting and in gaining access to covert visual observation of the gorilla's habits, she needed to create a "gorilla blind", keeping her body covered with a black cloth as she entered and exited from the gorilla blind. She had to downplay her intrusion into the gorilla's environment and disguise her femaleness because the gorilla's primary positive interactions with humans were with males.

Sometimes, within the settings where we had been participating in roles other than as researchers, the subjects had difficulty responding to us as researchers as occurred with Ernie: "When I interviewed physical therapists of whom I was a manager, one employee attempted to use his participation in my study for leverage in the work role."

By selecting sites familiar to us we were able to spend adequate time participating and observing. Time was essential for blending, establishing rapport, allowing for repeated observation and interview opportunities. This allowed us to make comparisons, identify and verify patterns and decide when the sampling became saturated.

As we shared our encounters in the field, we saw our biggest challenge was how to be more of an objective observer rather than a biased interpreter. Value laden eyes obstructed our vision of what was actually occurring. We were in danger of becoming part of the process and becoming more participant rather than observer, thus compromising the impartial eye of the outsider. We needed to be aware of how past experiences and readings affected our focus and interpretation.

I recall that collecting data from a mentor posed a problem as I tried to focus my observations and interpretations. My mentor contradicted what I believed he had taught me. Rather than recording information verbatim, I engaged in argument. When observing classrooms, I focussed on components I liked about my own classroom and may have missed important data. Being able to verbalize this as part of the collaborative review of our research process, kept me honest and it was suggested that I consider using this person as an informant rather than as a subject of my research.

Even when writing it is possible to have biases surface. It is necessary to use field notes and keep checking the data so we accurately describe "the way it

is". Several times in the development of a report, notes, reaction papers, and the audio tapes were reviewed and scrutinized for subjectivity. We found that two people working on similar studies or reviewing the data gave us a system to check our biases. This is a good approach for students to use in the learning process.

There is a continuum of involvement, the most basic position is that of an observer. During our group discussions, we discovered that novices struggle with the problems of being an observer. Observation means paying attention to the entire event which is constantly being changed by those in the setting. As novices we struggled to record it and not change the setting.

Our examination of our research process within the group indicates that we did indeed pass from one level of understanding to the next and looking back we know that we didn't ask enough questions. Each of us was discovering our subjective selves as participant observers with some of us more able than others to describe our reactions and distinguish their source.

What is it that we novices learned about participant observation as we conducted our research?

1) Participant observation is a skill involving the ability to see, hear, and feel.

2) In order to learn to see, hear and feel as a researcher, there must be a willingness to confront one's biases.

3) It is important to seek out an environment in which our actions are challenged in a way that enhances the development of our research skills.

4) Commitment of time and energy is essential. Time is needed to blend into the culture being studied in order to permit subjects to feel safe enough to let us see their real selves. Commitment is also needed to

remain in the field for sufficient time to understand the complex world we are attempting to capture in our research.

5) Respect for the subjects is the foremost issue for those engaging in participant observation. Careful protection of the individual's rights as we attempt to accurately portray the nature of the setting is the core of this research. The researcher is a potent force in the lives of the subjects who appear as the actors in our writings. We need to remain sensitive to the far reaching implications of our role in our subject's lives as we engage in participant observation.

We are novice researchers who used our group to question, vent frustrations, and offer and receive support as we individually and collectively worked toward an understanding and an affirmation of our role in the process of conducting qualitative research.

Learning Qualitative Data Analysis in a Collaborative Context

Jacqueline S. Weinstock
University of Vermont
March, 1989

In C. Glesne (Chair), Becoming Qualitative Researchers Through Collaborative Processes. Symposium conducted at the meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA.

The broad aim of qualitative data analysis, as we have come to see it with the help of qualitative researchers, and especially with the help of each other, is to tell a story we believe to be true. In this talk, I will share some of the problems and issues that arose for beginning students of qualitative research as we tried to tell our first stories using qualitative data. In the process, I will describe how struggling with these issues within a supportive group context enhanced not only the quality of the stories we came to tell but our understanding of and commitment to the qualitative research process itself.

A major problem that arose for most of us when we began to imagine analyzing our data involved the question of where to begin. Amidst a massive set of interview transcripts, observational reports, notes from the literature, as well as our own journal records, we felt overwhelmed. This was the time when many of us began to question our choice of a qualitative methodology. But having gotten this far, we were not yet ready to go back to the beginning and start again, using another approach. So we turned to the next best thing: since we couldn't move forward and we didn't want to go backwards, we figured out ways to legitimately stay in the same place by developing techniques for putting off data analysis. We became proficient in two particular techniques. The first one involved drawing the conclusion that it wasn't time to emerge ourselves in data analysis yet. It wasn't time because, perhaps, we didn't know enough about the topic, the people, the community we were studying, or perhaps because we didn't know enough about how to do data analysis. Whatever the specifics, the technique enabled us to avoid data analysis by forcing us to go back to the literature

for more instruction, or back to the field to ask more people more questions or the same people additional questions. At first this need to return to do more research seemed a reasonable one -- to ourselves and each other. It usually sounded good to our dissertation advisors. But after hearing it so much from each other, it began to wear a little thin and we began to question the true motivation behind this approach. Before talking about that, I want to briefly mention the other avoidance technique we tended to use. I call this one the "Too many things to do" technique, though that might not capture its true essence -- because it's not usually the case that we have too much we <u>have</u> to do; rather, it's more likely the case that we have lots of things we <u>think</u> we have to do. And we spend our time doing them, complaining all along that we wish we had more time for data analysis. This was the type of avoidance technique most of us used when doing our first qualitative projects, and, for that matter, when we were working on these papers you're hearing today. Linda described it best in one of our meetings. She said, "I'll clean the toilet, scrub pots, pay bills, do anything to avoid dealing with those piles of data aching to be analyzed."

So we used this technique -- a lot -- although to be honest, we rarely admitted to this one when talking with our committee members. While we felt comfortable telling each other that we'd spent the weekend cleaning the house or building a much needed bookshelf, we usually told our committee members that we hadn't done what we'd planned to do because we had to go back to the literature.

In being able to admit our frantic cleaning fits to each other, and in learning how to listen to the feelings behind each others' ventures back to the field or the library, we began to hear -- first in each others' stories

but then also in our own -- the fear of data analysis that was underlying these actions. We learned to talk more directly about these fears, and in so doing, we came to realize that part of the problem was that each of us imagined data analysis as one gigantic task that had to be done all at once or not at all. We thought we had to ask and answer all our research questions at the same time, and have all our categories and themes outlined ahead of time. Basically we thought we couldn't begin data analysis unless everything was perfect -- our data and ourselves as data analyzers.

It took us a while to really hear what we were saying and to see how ridiculous these notions were that we were hanging onto. Corrine, the experienced qualitative researcher in the group, could have pushed us out of this phase by telling us what we were really doing when we felt the need to go back to the field, but she didn't. And we're glad she didn't because besides the fact that we probably wouldn't have been able to hear her at the time, we doubt that it would have been as powerful a learning experience if she'd told us instead of letting us work together to discover the truth behind our actions. Eventually what happened in the group was that some of us began to question each other's need to continue to collect more data, or to mow the lawn the day that was set aside for data analysis. This questioning opened up the conversation and we began to address the feelings underlying these avoidance techniques. What we came to understand, through this process, was that many of our fears about qualitative data analysis stemmed from our assumptions about research, and when we examined these assumptions, we realized that they were based more often on quantitative approaches to research than on qualitative approaches. For example, we were buying into assumptions like, "Everything must be controlled for in an

experiment," or "All the variables must be selected and clearly defined ahead of time," or our favorite, "Personal doubts and fears have no place in the research process." And since we didn't know all our variables, very little was controlled for in our study, and we certainly had plenty of doubts and insecurities, we didn't feel we could do a good job with our research. Once we started talking directly about these assumptions, though, we remembered that one of the reasons we were drawn to qualitative research in the first place was that it was not based so rigidly on these assumptions. We knew but were not acting out of this understanding. In qualitative research, we were able to remind each other, it is okay to acknowledge our doubts, fears and biases. In fact, the exploration of these doubts, fears and biases is part of the research process, as is the realization that we can't know all the themes or variables to be explored beforehand. In qualitative research we are trying to let the themes emerge from the data rather than limit ourself by being open only to the variables we put into the equation.

Once we, as a group, remembered and reaffirmed these elements of qualitative research, we began to more freely talk about our doubts and biases, to raise our questions and share our fears, and to listen to each other's experiences in the field and reflections about the research. And not surprising, time and again we began to hear in our questions and doubts the beginnings of some of the notions that were to turn out to be our most useful insights into our data. I doubt if we would have noticed these insights by ourselves because we were so wrapped up in the problems that we couldn't see the inklings of solutions that others could hear in our words. Journals may serve some of the same purposes, but for us as beginning

researchers, the opportunity to share our doubts aloud and to get feedback on them was crucial. It was through this process that we learned what it means to use ourselves in the process of data analysis. I think perhaps the experience of being able to be ourselves with each other helped us to learn how to be ourselves in our research as well. We learned that in qualitative research, as with each other, we don't have to pretend.

Okay, so together we learned to use our fears to help us analyze our data instead of let the fears keep us immobilized in the face of data analysis. But we still weren't in the clear -- because as we got closer and closer to actually completing our projects, we faced another problem that scared us -- just as it was very scary to begin data analysis, it was very scary to imagine ending. Again, conversations with each other helped us to realize that we were all struggling with this issue, and that underlying it was the feeling that there's so many things we want to write about, so many different ways we want to think about the data. How could we finish until all the possible ways of thinking about the data were taken into account? As we talked, we realized that we were again having the same problem as we had with beginning data analysis -- this feeling that everything had to be done all at once or not at all. We felt that we had to address every question and report on every idea mentioned by the participants. But just as everything doesn't have to be perfect to begin analysis, we realized it doesn't have to be perfect to end it. It's not possible to look at our data from every angle. We can't even imagine all the angles just yet from our current perspectives. As we change, so too will our understandings of the data. Watching each other's ideas change from week to week helped us to see the continual nature of qualitative research and data analysis. It was

easier to see this by seeing how others change than by just thinking about our own changes -- because we tended to judge ourselves negatively for changing, as if we got it wrong the first time, but when we watched each other's ideas change and develop, we were better able to realize that the changes represented development and not just mistakes. Thinking and conceptualizing, understanding and coding, organizing and writing are all on-going endeavors. With this understanding of process, we found it easier to take risks in our writing and in our analyses -- because even if we write something up one way, it isn't final, and we can always improve upon it. The freer we were with taking risks, the more likely we were to envision various ways of making sense of the data and ultimately of finding some approach that would enable us to tell the story we most felt was there to tell.

So we learned to accept that finishing does not mean ending, that telling one story does not mean there are no other stories to tell. But we still had the problem of figuring out what the story we most wanted to tell was. It was here, perhaps, that the collaborative process was most crucial, for we needed to have a safe place to try out the different stories we were writing in our minds. We needed the opportunity to check out our stories with people who were both familiar with qualitative research in general as well as with our individual projects and personalities. That opportunity is what we created for ourselves in our class. We learned how to share our interpretations with each other, and to talk about our questions and doubts about these interpretations. We learned how to really listen to each other and to really try to understand how each person came to see the story the way she or he did. Very importantly, we learned how to tell when it was

this understanding, this getting into the other's perspective that was needed by the individual, and when they were wanting to hear our alternative perspectives. And we learned how to ask for each depending on where we were at in our own process of analysis. As we learned these specific things about each other, we also learned that listening to and trying to understand the opinions of others that contradict our own does not necessarily mean that we have to change our interpretations. That will depend on a lot of things, but whether our interpretations change or not, really listening to and taking in others' perspectives on the same data always makes them more informed.

Once we tested out our ideas on each other and adapted them to take in the things we hadn't seen, we felt ready to write up our stories. Again, at this point a collaborative work group can be most helpful. In our group, we read and re-read each others' drafts, making comments and suggestions, congratulating each other for where we had gotten to and encouraging each other to continue to improve.

In summary, by being able to share with each other each step of the way, our problems and doubts as well as our developing understandings and interpretations, we were able to improve upon and develop confidence in our own interpretations and to write them up as the stories that best reflected the understandings we had attained. We truly believe that those understandings we each reached were vastly improved through the collaborative process. We know that the process of getting to those understandings was much more enjoyable because of it.

ETHICS ON A FAULT

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In C. Glesne (Chair) Becoming Qualitative Researchers Through Collaborative Processes. Symposium conducted at the meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA

In preparing to tell you this brief version of a story about how I viewed a group of novice qualitative researchers, I thought it would be worthwhile to offer some information which related to the following questions. First, how did we come to include ethics as one of our semester foci when most of our topic areas could be labeled as components of the qualitative research process. Secondly, what happened over the time we spend together from an ethical perspective? And finally, did there appear to be anything different about the collaborative learning process, to which Corrine referred to in her opening comments, and other methods of moral learning?

When looking back over my field notes from the first class or two, it is very difficult to draw any conclusions about how we decided on ethics as one of our topics. However, if those notes in combination with my memory serve me at all well, my first impression about our decision to include ethics was that it was merely a sign of the times. Given my professional background as a physical therapist practicing at a teaching hospital and a university, the topic of ethics is certainly prevalent in my day to day activities. This is also true for most other members of our group. As time passed, I continued to reflect on our motives. Although not carefully validated with my subjects, I now see our selection process from at least two perspectives.

From one perspective it probably was truly a sign of the times. Our group had varying levels of awareness of ethics as we entered our first meeting of the semester. This awareness may have been an adequate reason for us to decide to consider ethics during our work. In addition to our own ethical awareness, each of us also had varying levels of research experience. Our group of novice researchers already had research experiences which raised, what I will call, ethical anxieties. Members of the group were not sure if the actions taken during our research were the morally right actions.

Although our initial choice of ethics as a focus had appeared to be a casual selection, in fact it may have also been an experiential and pragmatic decision. As a collective, our group had enough research experience to make ethics a concern. We may have been wondering, "Have I acted ethically in my researcher role? In addition, we may have hoped that we would gain assistance from group members in resolving some of the ethical dilemmas that we had already encountered, and assumed we would continue to encounter, as qualitative researchers. Regardless of our initial intent, ethical problem solving was clearly a theme during our work together.

Given that ethical problem solving was a theme, what then did we have for ethical questions and what did we do about those

questions? As a general observation, our initial ethical questions could be fairly characterized as being both timid and procedural. Although, at this point in my workings with this group I can't imagine referring to any member as timid, I stand by my observation that our initial ethical questioning of each other was indeed timid. We asked each other questions like, "Do you think that was the right thing to do?" or "Do you think that was the OK thing to do?" These questions related to how we gained access to a research site or the amount of information disclosed to potential subjects while soliciting their participation in our research or what we decided to do with the results of our research.

As asking these initial questions in a gentle manner allowed our collaborative group process to go forward, our early questions were also procedural and therefore not very threatening. We spoke about what kind of letters needed to be written as part of the process for gaining access or we spoke about which committees we needed to deal with due to our status as graduate students. These initial "ethical" questions were more political than moral in content. However, as the semester progressed and we became more comfortable with each other, the early stage timid questions changed to declarative statements like, "You can't do that" or "That is not the ethically right thing to do."

As we became less timid and less procedural, we began to move from talking ethics to doing ethics. By talking ethics I am referring to what I call a third party method of learning about ethical analysis. An ethical theory is introduced to a group and the group is asked to reflect on a written ethical dilemma. The ethical dilemma is not owned by any one in the group. The student assimilates the ethical theory and then applies the theory to the case study. No action is required of any member of the group.

Our initial discussions were somewhat abstract and not dissimilar from the third party study approach. It seemed as though, in those early discussions, we were talking about dilemmas which were not really involving any member of our group.

As time passed we began to do ethics. Members of the group began to seek assistance in analyzing real ethical dilemmas that had occurred during the previous week's work in the field. Also we discussed what actions we planned for the next week and the ethical problems we anticipated.

Laurie was seeking access to a renal dialysis unit. She was anticipating that ethical dilemmas would occur in her setting. She was concerned she might make observations as an experienced nurse in which she felt a patient's well being was at risk. This would cause her to intervene on behalf of the patient and of

course, potentially have a negative impact on the chances of her continuing her research at this particular site. However, action was required as a duty of her nurse role.

After discussing her concerns, the group helped Laurie plan to avoid this particular dilemma by setting up an ethically acceptable protocol with the nurses in the dialysis unit. This protocol would be used in the event Laurie observed actions which she felt ought not to go unreported. This was an example of doing ethics to help maintain an ethical standard within research.

Dick, on the other hand, had no problem gaining access but had a fundamental concern with the "use or abuse of subjects." Dick would frequently ask, "What gives me the right to ask this person these questions?" Dick was collecting data from first year school principals. This group of subjects was under significant emotional pressure and interviews of the nature Dick was carrying out frequently brought out expressions of their stress. In response to Dick's concerns, the group advised that because access was ethically achieved and he was working with adults who had the right to refuse to continue any of the interviews he was on ethically sound ground. In addition, Dick felt, and the group concurred, that his research would potentially make a positive contribution to improving the conditions under which this group of professionals performed

their job. Although we rationally discussed the cost-benefit ratios of Dick's work, the question, "What gives me the right...?" needs to be continually asked from the heart.

As frequently occurred, since we were all actively involved in research, an individual's research anxieties were managed my another group member trumping your anxiety. The night Laurie discussed her concern regarding avoiding an ethical dilemma which could result in injury or death of a patient, Dick responded, "What the hell am I worried about! I'm sitting here wondering if it is OK that I may make someone cry and you're sitting here wondering about making sure someone doesn't get killed!" Although this kind of an exchange frequently gave us comic relief, the group shared a deep concern for our subjects which continued throughout the time we have worked together.

These decisions appeared to be more relative than we would like to admit. I would assume if the same questions were presented to the members of the audience today we would not come to the same conclusions. However, we did agree that our efforts ought to include attempts to articulate our own ethical code. Time does not allow me to discuss the evolution of our code in this presentation but our intent was to have a code. Over our weekend retreat, we did comment about the relative nature of ethics and that relativism was better than not having any moral discourse. However, it did become clear later in the weekend

that we were making progress toward articulating a set of principles which could serve as a foundation for our own code.

So as we spent more time together, our questions were no longer timid but were declarative moral challenges. These ethical declarations were, of course, merely the entry point into ethical problem solving sessions in which the group attempted to reach an ethical consensus. Discussions also became less procedural. Now we were talking about specific dilemmas involving specific subjects of a specific researcher. We weren't just talking ethics, we were doing ethics. Our work was not from case studies but from our own research. We brought ethical dilemmas to the group to be discussed with the intent of determining if we had been ethically correct during our research from the previous week or how we ought to behave during our research in the week to follow.

In conclusion, our focus was very much on the stories our friends told to us. Each of us had different backgrounds in philosophy and research. Each of us attempted to bring our knowledge to the group and to contribute to the class discussion. However, regardless of our backgrounds we had to make ethical decisions because we were going back to the field that week. Doing ethics kept our sessions real and forced us to remain true to our data. The continuation of our respect for our subjects depended it. Our integrity as researchers depended on it.